

## MoFo Program Emphasizes DEI Across Firm Mentoring

By **Aebra Coe**

*Law360 (September 15, 2022, 2:04 PM EDT)* -- Morrison & Foerster LLP officially launched its MoFo Navigate program at the beginning of this year, creating a unified plan of action overseen by the firm's diversity, equity and inclusion team that combines the firm's various mentorship and sponsorship opportunities.

In an industry where diversity and inclusion efforts can sometimes be siloed or relegated to a small segment of law firm activities, Morrison & Foerster has gone in the opposite direction. In its MoFo Navigate program, a DEI lens is focused on all mentoring and sponsorship that happens across all groups of lawyers, whether they are members of diverse groups or not.

"[MoFo Navigate] provides us with opportunities to talk about mentoring across differences, and it starts to lay the groundwork for conversations about racial and gender diversity," said Natalie Kernisant, the firm's chief diversity and inclusion officer. "It's a powerful tool to start to sprinkle in traditional diversity, equity and inclusion concepts that includes everyone at the firm."

The umbrella of MoFo Navigate encompasses about a half-dozen different programs that are a collaborative effort among the various talent management departments at the firm and are managed by its diversity and inclusion team.

At the start, all new attorneys are assigned an associate liaison, who is a peer. The liaisons welcome new attorneys with regular and informal check-ins during their first six months to make sure the newcomers are being introduced to attorneys across the firm.

After that, the associate liaisons help transition the new attorneys to an assigned pathway program mentor, who is typically a more senior attorney. The pathway mentor becomes the new hire's primary mentoring resource for the next 12 to 18 months, giving informal training and feedback, making introductions to other attorneys and providing advice.

As lawyers get closer to the time when they would start to think about their path to partnership, usually around their fifth year, the MoFo Navigate sponsorship initiative kicks in, with partners bringing associates under their wing to get them ready for the partnership path and to help act as an advocate for them on that journey.

In addition to those three programs, which include all attorneys regardless of gender or ethnicity, there are several other mentoring and sponsorship programs that are provided exclusively for Black and

Latino attorneys, Asian American and Pacific Islander attorneys, and for female lawyers.

"The major impetus for focusing on mentorship and sponsorship as it relates to diversity, equity and inclusion at the firm is that we firmly believe that at the heart of diversity and inclusion efforts is connection and relationship building," Kernisant said. "Unconscious bias, whether we like it or not, affects our perceptions and interactions, and so to focus on removing those barriers and facilitating the development of these critical relationships is very important to us."

The law firm implemented a pilot period leading up to the launch of the program in January. According to Kernisant, the law firm learned some lessons from the pilot that will strengthen the program going forward.

For one, there was a good deal of structure around mentor meetings, with training for both mentor and mentee on how to get the most out of the relationship. But Kernisant said that going forward she plans to provide for more free time and space for less formal interactions between the pairs.

That could mean providing a quiet space away from either attorney's desk, a calendar invite to commit both to a period of time to meet and a stipend to get coffee or lunch.

"We've learned that while training is super important, equally important is creating that protected space away from the everyday demands of practicing law and giving them the opportunity to build the relationship and execute on the tools and learning in the training process," she said.

Another important takeaway from the pilot was that privacy within the mentoring program is absolutely essential so that the mentees feel comfortable opening up without fear of their information being shared with others, she said.

While some information is shared from one year to the next, for example the lawyer's interests or goals, in order to support greater career development, personal conversations remain confidential, Kernisant said.

"We are paying attention to that, making sure the information we're sharing is only information the associate is comfortable having shared and is designed to support their growth and development," she said.

--Editing by Jill Coffey and Alyssa Miller.